



# In the Public Eye

## Media Watch

### Sound surgeons

Gavin Yamey, *Deputy editor, wjm*, [gyamey@ewjm.com](mailto:gyamey@ewjm.com)

For physicians, the noises made by the body—the heart, breath, and bowel sounds—are clues to its health or sickness. But for the electronic “sound artists” Matmos, the San Francisco-based duo Drew Daniel and Martin Schmidt, these noises are music itself: notes, rhythms, and even whole melodies.

Listen to their new album, *A Chance to Cut Is a Chance to Cure*, and you will hear the sounds of the body, and its surgical manipulation, sampled from clinics and surgical suites and fused with electronic beats to form a fascinating musical collage.

It was, explained Daniel, a “delicate process” to build the trust of the surgeons who eventually let the pair and their digital recording equipment into the operating rooms. The litigious US environment, the fear of compromising the sterility of the surgery, and the thought of having a “couple of kids” messing around in the operating room made the physicians wary of the duo’s intentions.

But Matmos are serious artists who performed recently at the prestigious Pompidou Center in Paris, and these “high-art creden-

tials,” said Daniel, “legitimized us in the eyes of the surgeons.” What’s more, they are both doctors’ sons, which gave them even greater credibility.

It would have been easy to take the resulting recordings of surgical instruments slicing, breaking, and sucking the human body and turn them into a gore-fest high in shock value but low in musical complexity. But Matmos wanted to avoid this approach. Instead, they wove the recordings into a kind of social commentary that captures some of the wonder, and the controversy, of modern medicine.

“California rhinoplasty,” for example, the seventh track on the album, is a multilayered symphony of nose jobs, forehead lifts, and chin implants played out over the gentle hum of tissue being cauterized. In a cheeky jibe at cosmetic surgery, a jaunty melody from a nose flute meanders over the grim sound of bone being crushed. The satire continues in the upbeat funk of “Lipostudio (and so on),” which samples the slurps and squelches of liposuction.



Darcy Henley

Matmos weave rhythms and sounds from cosmetic surgery into a cutting musical commentary

These “bouncy and optimistic” tracks, said Daniel, are a form of criticism, not only of the human obsession with appearance, but also of the strict genres to which musicians are expected to conform. Matmos are unusual among electronic artists because they fit no easy category; instead, they throw the unexpected into the musical stew—the noise of a laser cutting into an eye, an acupuncture point detector moving over Schmidt’s skin, and the clashing together of a skull, spine, and teeth.

This ear for the offbeat stemmed from being brought up around physicians. Daniel has powerful memories of visiting his father, a plastic surgeon, at the hospital or in an animal research laboratory. His stepmother is also a surgeon who likes to operate while listening to Elvis. Schmidt’s father is a family physician with a taste for Wagner.

For Daniel, making the record was something Oedipal because it allowed him to enact “the fantasy of putting on my dad’s clothes and reconstructing what he does in

my own terms.” On one of the tracks, “For Felix (and all the rats),” composed by plucking and bowing the cage of the duo’s dead pet rat, Daniel comes to terms with his childhood experiences of vivisection. The track begins as a tranquil concerto but builds slowly to a jarring and discordant improvisation. “Sadness at the loss of our pet,” says the album’s sleeve-notes, “is put in perspective by the fact that a laboratory animal dies every second in the United States.”

Ethical questioning was important to Matmos at all stages of making the album, particularly in working out how to involve patients without exploiting them or sabotaging their confidentiality. The limits of what was acceptable to patients, explained Daniel, had to be worked out “on a case-by-case basis.”

For patients undergoing general anesthesia, the recording allowed them to hear what went on during their operation. It allowed them, said Daniel, “to return to something that they weren’t there to appreciate.” Those

who were awake during medical procedures found the recording process a valuable distraction, a kind of anesthesia in itself.

Physicians, say Matmos, should listen to the album as if looking at photographs. First they will get a fleeting impression, which will hopefully give way to a whole range of feelings and thoughts. One physician at least loves the record—Daniel’s father, who plays it while operating. The image is almost too good to be true—the plastic surgeon cutting away while listening to a musical critique of his actions. Daniel and Schmidt would surely approve of the irony.



*A Chance to Cut Is a Chance to Cure* is out now on Matador Records. See this article on our web site to hear a sample of the album.

## Netphiles

### Stress

Stress now has its own encyclopedia that chronicles terrors, traumas, and the latest treatments for the ensuing psychological fallout (*The Encyclopedia of Stress*, George Fink, Academic Press, 2001). The idea of an encyclopedia made of real paper probably seems rather quaint to the tech-heads and self-proclaimed computer uber-geeks here in Silicon Valley. After all, you can find electronic encyclopedias galore at Freeality ([www.freeality.com/encyclop.htm](http://www.freeality.com/encyclop.htm)) or Library Spot ([www.libraryspot.com/encyclopedias.htm](http://www.libraryspot.com/encyclopedias.htm)). But the whole point of a paper encyclopedia, surely, is its smell of bound leather, its sensual feel, and the way it becomes like an old and trusted friend.

It is easy to be cynical about the “stress industry,” which is worth over \$9 billion in the United States. Using the brilliant search engine All the Web ([www.alltheweb.com](http://www.alltheweb.com)), I found 4 million sites on stress, many offering unconditional promises of a stress-free life for the right price. There are courses, tapes, stress-busting toys, and even an “Online Psychohumorist” ([www.stressdoc.com](http://www.stressdoc.com)) to help you smile through your burnout or grief. The Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism takes a wry look at this “commerce of coping” at [stress.jrn.columbia.edu/site/intro/index.html](http://stress.jrn.columbia.edu/site/intro/index.html).

So how can you tell if you’re vulnerable to stress? The “vulnerability test” at [www.stressfree.com/vlnr\\_tst.html](http://www.stressfree.com/vlnr_tst.html) suggests that your risk is high if you don’t give and receive affection, exercise, or confide in others about your feelings. But I’m not sure what kind of stress the site refers to, since the term encompasses everything from depression, anxiety, and the psychological consequences of trauma to worries about pets, holidays, or finding the right hair care product for difficult, flyaway hair.

The irony-free American Institute of Stress ([www.stress.org](http://www.stress.org)) reminds us of the serious side of the condition. Stress-related illness, it says, makes up 75% to 90% of all visits to primary care physicians and is responsible for a million US citizens each day needing to take time off work.

Gavin Yamey, *Deputy editor*

**We welcome suggestions for web sites to be included in future Netphiles**